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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums**

Band (Jahr): **35 (1979)**

PDF erstellt am: **21.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-961176>

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# REIGNING VICTIM, THREATENED KING: AN EXPLORATION OF THE KING PARABLES OF SHIRTA

von Karl A. Plank

Within the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, a tannaitic Midrash on extensive portions of the book of Exodus, there exists a number of *meshalim* which hold in common a royal personage as their focal character. While these so-called «king parables» or «royal parables» occur throughout the corpus there is an evident clustering of them within the tractate Shirta — that portion of the Midrash which deals with «The Song at the Sea» (Exod. 15,1-21). In this essay these parables will be investigated with particular attention given to their exegetical function (i.e., as stories occasioned by and narrated to facilitate the interpretation of scripture) and their parabolic features.

## I. *The Parable of the Two Watchmen*

Antoninus asked our sainted Rabbi: «After a person dies, his body perishes. How can the Holy One, blessed be He, summon it to trial?»

Said Rabbi to him: «Why ask me only about the unclean body? Ask me about the pure soul! (But) there is a parable which is told; to what may this be likened? To a king of flesh and blood who had a flourishing orchard. The king set in it two watchmen, one of whom was lame and the other blind... (In the garden were fine new fruits. Said the lame man to the blind: I see fine early fruits... Let me ride on your back and we will get the fruit. This they did. Some time thereafter the king appeared and asked: Where are the fine fruits? Said the blind man: Am I able to see? And the lame man said: Am I capable of getting about? But the king who was clever made the lame man mount the blind one and sentenced them together. So it is with the body and soul...) ... «and thereafter ‹to judge His people›» (Ps. 50,4). (1)

The parable of the two watchmen, although existing in full form in the parallel *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon* (2) and in Sanhedrin 91b, occurs in our

text with a quite extreme abbreviation. Only the story's opening lines — those which set the scene and introduce the characters — are given, together with the concluding words of an accompanying interpretation drawing upon Ps. 50,4. Seemingly, the redactor can assume the story itself, as well as something of its interpretation, to be familiar to his readers.

As a Midrashic text the parable occurs within the context of the interpretation of a particular verse of scripture. It may be directly tied to the verse of scripture or it may have closer connection to a feature of the discussion of that verse, a discussion frequently already in progress in the text. From this perspective the parable can be seen to have an exegetical or expository function to illumine and facilitate the interpretation of the passage which furnishes its context. A certain interplay occurs between text (parable) and context (scripture or its discussion) that is creative of a meaning which neither could furnish independently. The context places a certain constraint upon our reading of the parable and the parable, in turn, provokes a reinterpretation of our understanding of that context.

The context of the parable of the two watchmen is furnished by the discussion of Exod. 15,1: «... I will sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted / The horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea.» Focusing upon the phrase «the horse and his rider», this particular Midrash opens with the observation that *both* the horse and rider are brought to trial at the Sea. An envisioned interrogation finds the horse blaming the Egyptian for forcing him to pursue the Israelites against his will and similarly, the Egyptian seeking to clear himself at the expense of the horse by saying, «It was the horse, he made me give chase against my will.» God, however, ends these attempts to obfuscate the issue: «He mounts the man on the horse and passes sentence on both together, as it is said, ‹The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.›»

In our text this is followed by an inquiry on the lips of Antoninus (to «our sainted Rabbi,» presumably R. Judah the Prince): «After a person dies, his body perishes. How can the Holy One, blessed be He, summon it to trial?» At this point the connection between Antoninus' inquiry and the preceding discussion is not obvious. Yet in the reply of Rabbi (containing the parable) the issue is reformulated in terms of the judgment of body and soul which through the parable is brought into parallel with the opening discussion.

The parable of the two watchmen referred to by Rabbi establishes an analogy of pairs between the lame man-blind man, horse-rider, and body-soul. Each pair is set in a context of judgment, a situation in which the

individual members of the respective pairs disclaim their responsibility: the horse and rider claim that each was forced by the other to pursue the Israelites; the blind man claims that he could not have taken the fruit for he cannot see and the lame man claims similarly that he cannot get about; the body claims that it is incapable of sin in the absence of the soul which motivates it and likewise, the soul claims its innocence apart from the body which commits the sin. Yet in each case the members of the pairs are judged together, as they had committed their culpable deed together (and indeed, *only* together).

The parable, as its interpretation makes clear («So it is with body and soul») points back to the inquiry of Antoninus. At one level it answers Antoninus' question: the body is brought to trial in reunion with its soul, even as the horse is mounted by the rider or the blind man by the lame man. Yet at a more significant level the parable challenges the presuppositions of Antoninus' question and provokes a reinterpretation of the origin of sin. Antoninus' question can be read to presuppose the view that sin resides in the body. His failure to mention the soul is a conspicuous omission as Rabbi's initial reply indicates: ««Why ask me only about the unclean body? Ask me about the pure soul!»» Against any attempt to locate the origins of sin or the situation of judgment in the physical nature of human beings, the parable insists that judgment is upon the whole person and sin is not a function of body or soul independently but of both together. (3) As the parable answers Antoninus' question so does it reformulate the issue raised by that question.

The parable in this particular Midrash is thus directed primarily at an aspect in the discussion of the scriptural text rather than that text itself. Still, the verse is not insignificant, for with respect to Antoninus' issue it also *functions* as parable, i.e., as with the horse and his rider, so it is with the body and soul. The question of Antoninus is framed by instances which compel its reinterpretation.

If, as we have seen, the story has a context-specific meaning, as true parable it should also have the capacity to stand independently from that context, i.e., to exist as a meaningful story in its own right. This is the case with the parable of the two watchmen. Quite apart from the question of body and soul the parable narrates a somewhat surprising and provocative contrast in perceptions of a situation, fundamentally that of human life before God. Two men are given a responsibility by their king which ultimately they fail to fulfill. For all their resourcefulness they are nevertheless poor watchmen. Yet their perception of the situation is that the appeal to the frailty of their condition will camouflage their deed and

excuse them from responsibility for the missing fruit. To this point in the story a certain sympathy is generated for the watchmen. The story, by depicting them as a blind man and a lame man plays on the reader's natural tendency to side with the disadvantaged. Further, the picaresque quality of their resourcefulness seems harmless if not amusing — perhaps even laudable, but not condemnable. However, the contrasting perception of the king, which refuses the perception of the watchmen, challenges our own expectations of the story and indeed, of our own human situation (in which our sympathies and expectations of the story are rooted). The perception of the king leads him to deny the appeal to frailty and to sentence the two men. But why? What does the king perceive that the watchmen do not? They are sentenced not because of what they did but because of what they failed to do. They are judged not because of their roguery, but ironically by that roguery. Their thievery exposes the inadequacy of the appeal to frailty to excuse them *as watchmen*. The king perceives that by working together their responsibilities as watchmen could and should have been fulfilled.

II. *The Parable of the King of Flesh and Blood:*  
 ‹Which One is the King?›

THIS IS MY GOD AND I WILL GLORIFY HIM: Rabbi Eliezer says: How can you tell that at the Sea a bondswoman could see what neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel nor all the other prophets ever saw? For of them it is said, «And in the ministry of the prophets I appeared in likenesses (only)» (Hos. 12,11), and it is written, «The heavens were opened and I saw reflections of God» (Ezek. 1,1). A parable is told; to what may this be likened? To a king of flesh and blood who entered a province surrounded by his circle of guards, warriors to his right and left, his troops in front of him and behind him, so that everyone had to ask, «Which one is the king?» — for like the others he is of flesh and blood. But when the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself at the Sea, not one of them had to ask, «Which one is the king?» On the contrary, as soon as they saw Him, they recognized Him, and all of them loudly exclaimed, «This is my God, and I will glorify Him!» (4)

This parable occurs within a discussion of Exod. 15,2 and seeks to facilitate the interpretation of the affirmation «This is my God, and I will glorify Him!» The Midrash begins with the apprehensive question (5) of

Rabbi Eliezer who has observed in the scripture the oddity that all of Israel, even the lowliest maidservant, saw at the Sea «what neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel nor all the other prophets ever saw.» To the prophets God appeared in likeness only; in the heavens Ezekiel sees only reflections of God. But at the Sea *all* of Israel recognizes God himself and exclaims, «This is my God, and I will glorify Him!»

Following the question and its proof-texts comes the telling of the parable which contrasts the revelation at the Sea with the appearance of a king of flesh and blood surrounded by his entourage. In the latter case the observers are unable to distinguish the king from his attendants, for like them he is of flesh and blood. The crowd must ask, «Which one is the king?» Yet in the former case there is no need for such a question, for God himself is clearly recognizable in his action at the Sea. The parable's contrast is then two-fold: first, the responses of the observers in one case express confusion, while in the other, clear recognition and affirmation; second, the object of perception is in one case indistinguishable, while in the other, visible and apparent. But it is the second of these contrasts which the Midrash emphasizes. That it is *all* of Israel who clearly recognizes God rests not on the remarkable capacities of Israel, but on the «extraordinary generosity of God's self-revelation.» (6) The crowd does not recognize the king for he reveals himself to be but a man of flesh and blood like his attendants. God, however, is easily identified for he reveals himself in his otherness. This then replies to the initial apprehension: so generous was God's revelation at the Sea that even the bondswoman perceives what the prophets never saw.

Still the parable provokes a further reinterpretation of the understanding of God presupposed by Rabbi Eliezer's apprehension. As Emil Fackenheim's profound interpretation of this Midrash makes abundantly clear, to exclaim «This is my God» is to affirm God's actual presence in human history. (7) Thus challenged by the parable is the prophetic perception of a God who reveals himself only in image and reflection and called into question is any inclination toward an otherworldly «mysticism» or privileged access for which such perception would furnish the model and warrant. The exclamation «This is my God, and I will glorify Him!» is the affirmation of a God who has revealed *himself* to *all* of Israel in the midst of her *history*.

As parable, the story is a self-contained tale of irony. Goldin describes this irony as follows: «this God who is invisible, when He reveals Himself, is recognizable at a glance. On the other hand, a creature of flesh and blood is certainly visible; yet when an emperor or king makes his



appearance, one cannot tell him apart from his entourage (let alone that he has to be protected by so many bodyguards).» (8) The irony riddles the notion of recognizability and revelation. What is visible in the invisible (God), yet invisible in the visible (the king)? What does it mean to reveal oneself? To reveal oneself is not simply to appear but to act, for it is the deed which discloses the power and intention by which one is recognized. It is the miraculous act of the invisible that is visible in the salvation of the astonished Israelites. In contrast, apart from the execution of a kingly deed the visible ruler appears anonymously and does not reveal who he is. The parable itself opens into the conviction of God's presence in history by provoking a reinterpretation of the way in which that presence is revealed.

### III. *The Parable of the King and the Wandering Son*

And the Sages say: I shall be in His company until I arrive with Him at His Temple. This is like to a king whose son had gone overseas and the king set out after him to stand by him; then the son moved on to another province, and the king set out after him to stand by him. So here: when Israel went down to Egypt, the Shekinah went down with them, as it is said, «I will go down with thee into Egypt» (Gen. 46,4); when they went up out of it, the Shekinah went up with them, as it is said, «And I will bring thee up and also come up with thee again» (ibid.); when they got down to the Sea, the Shekinah was with them, as it is said, «And the angel of God moved along» etc. (Exod. 14,19); when they set forth into the wilderness, the Shekinah was with them, as it is said, «And the Lord went before them by day» (etc.) (Exod. 13,21) — until with them they had brought Him along (as it were) to His Temple. And so too it says, «Scarce had I passed from them» etc. (Cant. 3,4) (9)

The Midrash in which this parable occurs is a further discussion of Exod. 15,2, focusing upon the concluding phrase, «and I will glorify Him.» Rabbi Ishmael expresses the apprehensive question as to whether it is indeed possible for human beings to bestow glory on their Creator. Following his question a number of examples are given by which the Creator is glorified: religious acts and deeds which imitate his compassion; and, proclamation of the beauties and splendor of the Creator before the nations of the world. The last of these is cited twice, on the lips of both

Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Akiba. There ensues a dialogue between Israel and the nations ultimately expressing the exclusion of the nations from the company of the Creator and the inclusion of Israel: «But Israel reply to the Nations of the World: You have no part of Him; on the contrary, «My Beloved is mine, and I am His» (Cant. 2,16), «I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine» etc. (Cant. 6,3).» At this point the saying of the Sages is given («I shall be in His company...») and the parable is told.

As Goldin has noted, the translation of the statement of the Sages is problematic and the connection between the statement, the parable and its application is awkward. (10) Nevertheless, the parable seems to suggest the way in which «I shall be in His company» is to be understood and finally challenges Israel's concluding reply to the nations. The parable likens the presence of the Shekinah in Israel to the king who follows his wandering son from province to province, to stand by him and to protect him. Accordingly, that Israel is to be in the company of God is not to be seen as the result of any particular merit or the peculiar claim of the possessive lover, but instead as the consequence of the persistent turning of the «king» to pursue and protect his «son.» Israel will be in the company of God because of who *he* is: a God who himself turns to seek and stand by Israel.

The parable has further implication with respect to the concluding reply of Israel to the nations which immediately precedes the statement of the Sages and the parable. In likening the Shekinah to the king, the parable creates a correspondence between Israel and the wandering son. The reason for the son's journey is unspecified by the story, yet expressed is the fact that he takes up life in a province other than that of the king's. In doing so he risks becoming, if not actually existing, as one whose life is governed by the rules and ethos of that province. The correspondence between Israel and the son turns on and challenges the distinction presupposed by the exclusion of the nations of the world. Where the divine presence is a result of God's own pursuit, it is not the distinction between Israel and the nations which is determinative of his company. Were this so, would not the son who takes up life in another province be continually estranged from the company of his father, the king?

The parable's image of the king persistently pursuing his wandering son — an image here understood to reflect the divine presence with Israel amid their wandering history — provokes a bold reinterpretation of the kingship of God and the situation of the wandering «son.» As the king is not remote or withdrawn from the plight of the son, but is instead one who himself seeks to share that plight, to stand by the son and protect him, so



can the kingship of God be understood as a presence not removed from the human situation — its plight and scandal — but located within that situation. The king himself makes a journey. Risking kingship, he enters a province not his own for the sake of the son: God goes down into Egypt and journeys in the wilderness. Or as another Midrash more sharply expresses the same affirmation: «whithersoever Israel was exiled, the Shekhinah, as it were went into exile with them. » (11) Accordingly, the parable calls into question the fear that the end of all wandering — be that the chosen journey or the imposed exile — is to be unprotected and alone. Summoned to reinterpretation is the notion that God withdraws from human plight or that its existence signals the absence of God. As the king journeys in the footsteps of the son, so the Shekinah goes into exile with Israel. Thus their wandering is not a sign of God's absence but an occasion of his presence, a situation in which his voice still is heard to command, to comfort and ultimately to save. (12)

#### IV. *The King's Robber*

Inside the land of Egypt Pharaoh stood mouthing fivefold blasphemies: ... And corresponding to this fivefold speech, the Holy Spirit retorted ... A parable is told; to what may this be likened? To a brigand who was standing behind the royal palace and blaspheming to this effect: «If I find the king's son, I'll seize and slay him! I'll crucify him! I'll put him to a most horrible death!» (13)

This parable occurs within the discussion of Exod. 15,9 and is part of the prolonged interpretation of «The enemy said». The sequence of interpretation of the phrase is quite long and moves through various phases including the position of the pericope, knowledge of the enemy's intention (how could Israel have known?), and ambiguities of that intention (did Pharaoh understand what he was saying?). It is, however, the proximate context that is significant for the parable. The Midrash depicts Pharaoh within the land of Egypt boasting of his threatening intentions against Israel, i.e., the «fivefold blasphemies» of Exod. 15,9. Against these boasts the Midrash poses the counter-response of the Holy Spirit, i.e., five quotations from the Song at the Sea which refer to God's destruction of the enemy. Immediately following the retort of the Holy Spirit is the parable which functions to emphasize the preposterousness of Pharaoh's boast.

Like the parable of the two-watchmen this story does not occur in full form — most likely because its ending would be assumed self-evident. (14) Nevertheless, the text provides enough to create the desired emphasis. Pictured in the parable is a robber who, while standing behind the palace, boasts of the horrible death which he will inflict upon the king's son. The distinctive feature of the parable, however, is not in the threat itself, but in the fact that the robber makes his boast from outside the palace. The threat is surely empty for the brigand has no access to the palace and thus no hope for carrying out his defiance upon the king's son. According to the Midrash, Pharaoh's boast has no more power than that of the robber. As the robber can make his threat only outside of the palace, so does Pharaoh boast only «inside the land of Egypt.» In neither setting can the respective threats be carried out; in neither place do the defiant ones encounter the object of their defiance, their alleged victim.

#### V. *The Parable of the Brigands and the King*

THE SANCTUARY, O LORD, WHICH THY HANDS ESTABLISH: How precious is the Temple in the sight of Him Who Spoke and the World Came to Be! For when the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, only with one hand did He create it... But when He comes to build the Temple, it will be, as it were, with His two hands, as it is said, «The Sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands establish, when the Lord will reign.» When will *that* be? When Thou shalt build it with Thy two hands! — A parable: To what may this be likened? To brigands who made their way into the king's palace, plundered his possession, slew the royal entourage, and destroyed the royal palace. Some time later the king brought them to judgment. Some of them he had imprisoned, some of them he had slain, some of them he had crucified: once again he took up residence in His palace, and thereafter His sovereignty was recognized in the world. That is why it is said, «The sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands establish, when the Lord will reign for ever and ever.» (15)

Goldin's division of the text, here maintained, suggests that the parable is not so much independent commentary on «The Lord will reign» (Exod. 15,18) as on the conjunction of that clause with the conclusion of the preceding verse, «The sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands establish.» Accordingly, the verse is to be understood as follows: «O Lord, Thy

Sanctuary, Thou establishest it with Thy (two) hands when the Lord reigns — i.e., when Thy sovereignty will have been universally recognized.» (16) The function of the parable — a story in which a vanquished king reclaims his palace — is to bring together the building of the Temple and universal recognition of sovereignty with the restoration of justice, i.e., the judgment of the brigands.

The parable, however, has a meaning which goes beyond its exegetical function. Hengel's suggestion that the parable expresses an attempt to come to terms with the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem seems probable, although the significance of its image transcends its historical particularity. (17) This parable shatters every confident expectation created by the previous parable which understood the threat of the robber to be only empty boasting. Neither the palace nor its inhabitants are any longer secure for somehow the brigands have gained entry and set about on their task of destruction. Thus life faithful to the king is rendered precarious; the protection afforded by his reign is imperiled by the robbers' spree. Unexpressed, but nevertheless present in the story, is the disturbing question: the robbers enter the palace, but where is the king?

Finally, this is the significance of the parable's image: the kingship is not inviolable. Survival is in question until the brigands are brought to judgment. But the parable offers an equally significant counter-image: the king is one who does restore justice and reclaim the palace as his own. The resulting tension between the two images returns the reader to the question posed by the Midrash — «when will *that* be?»

## VI. *Ironic Kingship: A Postscript*

Although their function is thoroughly exegetical, the king parables also can be seen to reflect and express an understanding of kingship. They inevitably embody the value of kingship by their very imagery, even when functioning to facilitate the interpretation of scripture. Such imagery is particularly appropriate within Shirta for the text it interprets celebrates a root event in the experience of God's own kingship, his rule over and for his people. Yet such imagery is pervaded with irony, for the historical life of the community which gave rise to and preserved Shirta is itself riddled by events which signal the king's absence or weakness, if not challenging the very notion of kingship.

Throughout the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* the interpreters adamantly refuse to resolve the irony, the paradox which affirms the presence of God amid the reality which portends only his absence. If anything, the irony is heightened. In the king parables of Shirta we find not only the embodiment of the value of kingship but its irony as well. At times that irony is central to the meaning of the parable ; at other times it is implicit within the imagery, but only peripheral to the story. Taken together, however, the parables can be seen to preserve within themselves the irony of the experience of God's kingship and the reinterpretation of value that such irony necessitates. Within this collection, who is the king? He is the owner of a flourishing orchard, yet his watchmen are a lame man and a blind man. As the one who is present in history, yet above history, he is the invisible one seen by all of Israel at the Sea. The father of a wandering son, he is not, as we would expect, the one who is sought, but the one who seeks ; not the one who withdraws from but the one who draws near to the alien province that is not his own. As one who scoffs at the threat of brigands he falls victim to their defiance ; yet it is the powerless victim who is the king that brings judgment against the robbers. Like Israel, the king has become a victim, a wanderer and a seeker. But then such experience no longer simply reflects his absence but the hope of his presence in the experience. The irony is that the victim still commands and the seeker remains the one who is to be sought. The affirmation, though riddled, must remain the same : «This is my God, and I will glorify Him.»

## NOTES

- (1) The translation here and throughout the essay (unless otherwise noted) is that of Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 104-5; cf. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. and ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:21.
- (2) The *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon* is the companion Midrash on Exodus whose sources are derived from the school of Rabbi Akiba (of whom Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai was a disciple); the sources of the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, however, originate in the contemporary and competing school of Rabbi Ishmael. Differences between the schools are more strongly marked in the treatment of halakhic material than in haggadic. Accordingly, in Shirta, a characteristically haggadic treatise, a general consensus between them can be assumed, although not to the extent of unanimity (thus Goldin, p. 12); on this matter see Goldin, pp. 9-12; Lauterbach, 1: xxiv-xxvi; and George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1:88-89, 135-38.
- (3) Cf. Moore, 1:485-89.
- (4) Goldin, pp. 112-13; cf. Lauterbach, 2:24-25.
- (5) Regarding «apprehensive question» see Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), pp. 273-88.
- (6) Goldin, p. 113.
- (7) Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 3-34.
- (8) Goldin, p. 113.
- (9) Goldin, pp. 117-18; cf. Lauterbach, 2:27.
- (10) Goldin, pp. 117-18. The awkwardness stems, in part, from a shift in subject from Israel's self-exclamation to God's action.
- (11) Lauterbach, 1:114; see Fackenheim, pp. 28-29.
- (12) Cf. Fackenheim, p. 29.
- (13) Goldin, pp. 184-85; cf. Lauterbach, 2:57-58.
- (14) The *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon* offers a somewhat fuller account, although as Goldin suggests, it too assumes the ultimate conclusion to be self-evident. It completes the parable as follows: «(when) the king heard this, he was filled with fury against him.» Goldin, p. 186.
- (15) Goldin, pp. 237-39; cf. Lauterbach, 2:79-80.
- (16) Goldin, p. 238.
- (17) Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), p. 41.